

# Utilizing Community Heritage Assets for Community Development

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## Heritage NL

**Introduction:** Heritage assets are one of the most important resources that any community has be they in the form of tangible things like historic structures, districts, and landscapes or intangible things like stories, cultural traditions and knowledge, and tradition bearers. Their preservation, safeguarding, and development can reinforce community identity, pride, and unique sense of place and can support economic development and new business opportunities. This often involves finding new uses for or “adaptively reusing” heritage assets.

- In the case of the adaptive reuse of heritage structures, it is critical to find a sustainable business model. I’d like to share with you some good examples of how this is being done elsewhere in the province along with processes for identifying potential new uses.
- The ultimate goal is to preserve historic structures and, presumably, to adapt them to suit real needs in the community and to serve as a catalyst for community development. Tourism is one, but not the only, possibility for utilizing heritage buildings.
- One way to think about heritage as a community development tool is to think about the ways in which heritage contributes to places people want to live and to invest. A key aspect of this is preserving those aspects of our communities that make us unique: our buildings and building traditions; our cultural landscapes; our sense of community. Research has shown that those communities that are the most successful in attracting and retaining the creative people who drive our economy are ones that have preserved their heritage and that invest in culture. We see this in places large and small. The Town of Bonavista is one great example where young entrepreneurial and professional people are moving to the community, attracted by its well-preserved heritage.
- I scratch my head sometimes when I see new structures we are building in our communities: non-descript boxes that would be at home on any highway strip in North America but that have no sense of special place while attractive heritage structures sit largely idle – beautiful old churches and fraternal lodges. An English commentator made the observation on our old churches that such beautiful buildings will never again be built in these places. Why would we take them down? Let’s repurpose our older buildings. It’s also the green thing to do on the basis of the embodied energy that exists in every building.
- The Town of Bonavista is a good example in this province of using local heritage resources as the basis for creating a new future for a community. Through the work of the Bonavista Historic Townscape Foundation numerous heritage structures have been

restored and beautification work/infrastructure upgrades were made on the main commercial street and on the harbour front. A focal project was the restoration of the old Garrick Theatre, a 1940s cinema in the centre of town. It was restored as a cinema and performance venue that provides a wide variety of entertainments for local residents and visitors. How do we keep our young people if we don't offer them anything to do; if we lack cultural amenities and meaningful activities for them to take part in?

- The public investments in Bonavista have, in turn, spurred private investment. Bonavista Living was created through a sizeable investment by an American investor, that has purchased just over 50 properties and that it is restoring and renovating. Some have been sold; others are being leased. It is providing low-cost rental space to new businesses which has attracted several new operations, some of them by St. John's entrepreneurs. According to a recent statistic, more than 30 new residents have moved to Bonavista, most of them in their 20s and 30s, attracted by the perceived quality of life in that community. A sister company, Bonavista Creative, operates a finish carpentry business that manufactures custom heritage doors, windows and architectural elements. All of this was built on the community's rich heritage. I strongly believe that with a good plan virtually any community in this province can use its heritage as a launching pad for its future.
- There are other communities that are utilizing their heritage as the keystone for development. The Town of Port Union, home to an incredible collection of buildings that date to the time of Coaker's Union Town, is being revitalized one building at a time through the efforts of the Sir William Ford Coaker Foundation. The Shorefast Foundation, which is utilizing its tangible and intangible heritage assets to create new business opportunities on Fogo Island, has received international attention for its success. Tourism can be an important part of the redevelopment strategy but it is not the only option. As an example, the old Saltfish plant and general store in Port Union have been turned into an iceberg water bottling plant. Plans for some of the town's row houses include creating affordable housing.

To me there are some key lessons from Bonavista and Port Union for other communities:

- 1) Have a long-term plan for how you will utilize and preserve your heritage resources and undertake community upgrades and beautification that will make your town more attractive to locals and visitors alike. A plan is crucial to attract the public and private dollars that Bonavista has attracted.
- 2) The Heritage Development Corporation is an excellent model for acquiring, restoring, and managing heritage properties that there is not a strong market for. Such a corporation can restore (often with public dollars); lease and sell the properties. What the corporation doesn't try to do generally, is manage businesses themselves as they

rarely have the knowhow and skills to do this. Rather it sets the stage for private investment.

- 3) The focus isn't necessarily on tourism, per se although that can be part of it but on creating amenities and serving the needs of the community. BHTF sought to create a community that residents could be proud of and that they wanted to live in. If a community can do that, tourists will naturally follow.
- 4) Public-private partnerships can be a good way to preserve and adaptively reuse heritage structure. The former Saltfish plant in Port Union is a good example. The building's owner, the Sir William Ford Coaker Foundation, entered into a long-term lease with a private company which front-ended the cost of their multi-year lease. These funds were used by the foundation to access public community economic funding to undertake a multi-million dollar restoration of the building.
- 5) Community revitalization and undertaking major heritage adaptive reuse projects is usually slow, incremental work that, over time leads to success, one project or one step at a time. Bonavista has been at it for 20 years and, in the last few years, has seen things really take off.

### **Supporting Adaptive Reuse of Heritage Buildings**

- How do we best put our heritage structures to work? To find new life for them that will provide a reason to maintain them? Where possible I think we should try to get our heritage buildings into the hands of either the private sector or social enterprise. The upkeep of heritage buildings is a significant burden on many community organizations. A private owner or a business is likely going to have a greater ability to cover these long-term costs and to put a building to good use. In cases where under-utilized heritage properties are in the hands of private owners, the community can play a role in supporting these properties moving into the hands of those who will care for and develop them. Especially in instances where a heritage property goes on the market a community can help by identifying opportunities for adaptive reuse, by putting together information packages on the history of a heritage property and a listing of any incentives that could support its redevelopment. For example, if it was a good candidate for heritage designation by HFNL it would then qualify for restoration funding. Any tax incentives that the community has to support heritage preservation or business development could be highlighted and the package shared with real estate representatives.
- An example of this is the former Greenspond Courthouse. The structure had been leased to the Cape Feels Trust which operates the Barbour Premises in Newtown but had recently been given back to Greenspond because the Trust couldn't maintain it and it was becoming dilapidated. The town's first inclination was to operate it as a museum but it seemed to us that there was little capacity for the town to be doing so. We

recommended that the better thing to do would be to identify the kinds of uses they would like to see for the building and put out a call for proposals to lease or sell the building to a business operator. If it was a B&B and/or restaurant it would likely attract more people into the community than if it was a static museum.

- In the case of the historic former Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Harbour Grace, an impressive stone monument, a volunteer group headed up an extensive community consultation process to gather ideas from the public on adaptive reuse and to determine community needs that could possibly be met in a redeveloped building. The value of this process was that it identified some interesting new possible uses and also helped to create greater buy-in for any future adaptive reuse. The recommended plan was for a multi-purpose space that includes: rentals (for weddings, performances, meetings); market building; incubator for local small businesses, activities that support residents with special needs and community gardens. The next step is to pass the building from the diocese over to a community organization. In the end the building was sold to a private business that plans to develop it into a brewery/hotel/venue but the community engagement process helped prepare the community for a repurposing of the building.
- As mentioned earlier, in places where there is not a strong market for the purchase of heritage properties or where the restoration costs are too high for the private sector, a public-private partnership may be the way to go of which the Port Union example is a good one.

### **Not Every Heritage Building can be a Museum, Theatre or Arts Centre**

- Not every heritage building can be a museum, theatre or arts centre. Invariably, when we talk to a community about finding a new use for one or more of its heritage buildings, the idea comes forth to turn them into museum, theatre or arts centre. Not that it is never appropriate to do these things but there are number of challenges:
  1. It is hard to make them pay. The majority of museums and arts facilities in the province are struggling to make ends meet. Getting the money to create a museum or arts facility is the easy part. Getting the staff to operate it in a professional manner and finding the money to repair the roof or the windows down the road is the hard part. So there isn't really much of a business case to be made for most of them. And where they are created, they can't be aimed just at tourists but need to meet community needs as well.
  2. The volunteer capacity to operate these facilities is dwindling in most cases. And can we really expect volunteers to know how to program and market cultural facilities without professional staff? In the case of museums many in the province are static places that aren't able to keep the interest of a visitor for more than 15 minutes or so. Not to mention that, with a few exceptions, they aren't really places where locals gather with any frequency. Which gets me to another point which is that museums somehow take

heritage out of everyday life and put it on a sort of pedestal: it's for the tourists or the school visits but not really a place where most of us would hang out with any regularity. Far better to adapt heritage buildings to be the places where we live, work, play and shop. If heritage becomes part of our everyday lives it has far more value.

That being said, I think that the business of museums requires us to remove the velvet ropes and "do not touch" signs and get museums off of their pedestals by making them the kinds of places where we do more of the kinds of things residents do on a normal basis: get together to socialize; to be entertained; to have a meal. Not only do these things draw locals and provide visitors with a more dynamic memorable experience but they are the kinds of things that can generate much-needed revenue. I use the example of Provincial Historic Sites which has moved its emphasis away from the heritage site as a hands-off experience to one in which visitors can take in an intimate house concert, have a meal, or be entertained. The result of programming has been a 50% increase in visitation over the last three years. Of course we have to look after the valuable artifacts but maybe we stock our programming spaces with less valuable items or reproduction furniture that can be used while we safely display the artifacts of great value.

### **Experiential Tourism**

- For communities that want to share their heritage with visitors and to develop tourism the emphasis is, increasingly, on experiential tourism which is defined as: *tourism that allows people to experience new people, culture and places and, to discover something inside themselves along the way. Tourists want to immerse themselves in the local culture and participate whenever and wherever they can in ways that draw on the five senses.*
- Experiential tourism focuses on create memories for visitors and provides for an immersive experience. Think about your most memorable travel experiences. Were they about visiting a museum or seeing a show – generally passive experiences -- or were they about the opportunity to really get involved in something, about hands-on learning and about real interactions with local people. The great thing about experiential tourism is that it doesn't necessarily require a lot of investment in infrastructure, rather it makes use of the existing capacity and places in the community. "Cod Sounds", for those of you who haven't heard of it, is a business started by Lori McCarthy that offers a variety of food experiences, all of which avail of already existing facilities or amenities including: a Newfoundland beach for a cook-up of locally foraged ingredients (which visitors helped harvest) or a "culinary adventure" or a camp fire somewhere out in nature having a Newfoundland boil-up, sampling local foods all the while learning about our food traditions and local stories. I suggest you check out the company's website.

- I'd also suggest that you contact the regional Tourism Destination Management Organization which can tell you about what the regional priorities are for tourism development that you will need to tie into for success.
- In thinking about tourism uses for your heritage buildings think about the range of services and experiences that tourists want: food; accommodation; learning opportunities; crafts and locally-produced items.

## **Steps to Using Heritage Assets as a Community Economic Development Tool**

### **1. Identify your Community's Heritage Resources**

- A good starting point for a community that wants to use its heritage resources as a tool for community enhancement and development is to identify what it has to work with; what makes it unique. What are the "raw ingredients" in terms of heritage resources that could be turned into community development opportunities? In particular, what are those things that are not always the most obvious but which might have the greatest potential? I would suggest that the starting point is to do a community heritage inventory in which you record everything you can think of. There are the obvious things like heritage buildings and heritage collections of artifacts or archival materials. And the less obvious things like:
  - Places in the landscape where traditional activities occurred; where events occurred in the past; that have unique names that may only be remembered by an older generation; or that are simply beautiful spots to hang out.
  - Landscape features like traditional root cellars, sheds, fishing stages and stores, fences and gardens – these are the things that define the unique character of your community and that may suggest locations for certain kinds of activities
  - Traditional past-times, entertainments and activities
  - Stories and music
  - Local food traditions
  - The best is to plot all of these on a map of the community that allows you to see clusters (concentrations of things might suggest certain opportunities) or interesting relationships between different elements. A concentration of fishing infrastructure and knowledge may suggest experiential activities related to catching, processing, and eating seafood. Or you may see a bunch of underused structures that you could use for interesting activities like art and craft workshops, production facilities or unusual accommodations. It is particularly useful when you overlay it with other infrastructure and services in your community. For example, a local library could become the venue for special heritage displays or talks. A community hall with its kitchen could be used as a venue for an experiential tourism experience on local foodways.

- Heritage NL’s “People, Places, and Culture” program can help communities to undertake the mapping of its heritage assets. It involves two workshops: one to which the community is invited to share their knowledge about local heritage: places; structures; stories; people; cultural traditions and knowledge; a second involving major stakeholders to identify strategies for protecting and developing local heritage resources identified in the first workshop.

## **2. Find out what your community wants**

- Engage your community in a conversation about what kind of a future residents want. Is tourism part of the mix? Are there special needs in the community (e.g., seniors, youth, people at risk, employment) that could be met in a repurposed building? What skills are there in the community that could contribute to the community’s development? What do people value and don’t they value? What do they and don’t they like about the way their community looks and the way it works? A community survey, focus group sessions, or town hall meetings can be a good way to get answers to these questions.

## **3. Make a Plan**

- As mentioned before, a long-term plan that identifies and prioritizes opportunities, considers economic viability; identifies resources for achieving your goals is critical to achieving something. A plan gives a community a clear sense of where it wants to go and allows it to accomplish things one step at a time. A plans will gives a lot of credibility with funders as they can see how each project is part of a larger whole. ACOA and TCII are important partners on this type of venture. Heritage NL can help when developing a terms of reference. Get in touch with the regional development staff of ACOA and TCII to explore funding and development opportunities.

## **4. Organize for success**

- Establishing an organization with the right tools, people and skills is critical to moving a community development/heritage revitalization plan forward. This could be an arm of the municipality, a community, not for profit group or an existing organization. Some of the most successful community organizations I have seen don’t just draw on the people within their own community but caste a wider net to include people with interest in your community (e.g., expats); skills, expertise and connections to get the job done (The Wooden Boat Museum is a good example of a community-based heritage group that draws on expertise from around the province for its board). Having strong leadership is key to keeping things moving forward and for rallying the troops.

## 5. Forge Partnerships

- Establishing effective partnerships with other groups and entities is critical to success. Think about the groups, government agencies, businesses, and educational institutions that have something to offer and that share some common goals. At a minimum, partners can offer moral support and demonstrate broad community support for an initiative. More particularly, they can share their resources in the form of: money; in-kind contributions or services; professional capacity and expertise; training;

### **A word about Heritage NL and what it offers:**

- Designation of Registered Heritage Structures and Registered Heritage Districts – provides increased profile; listing on a national register; and access to funding
- Designated structures become eligible for granting that can cover up to 30% of the costs of restoration. As well, restored buildings are then eligible for maintenance grants of up to \$5,000 every 5 years.
- Help with identifying adaptive reuse options for heritage structures and undertaking an analysis of their financial viability
- Technical information on building restoration.
- People, Place and Culture workshops
- The ICH office under Dale Jarvis can offer assistance with undertaking oral history projects, documenting and inventorying cultural traditions and knowledge, projects to engage seniors. And more.

For information on Heritage NL programs go to: [www.heritagenl.ca](http://www.heritagenl.ca)